

This year, my husband, Jack, and I went to a rather strange place for a vacation. We traveled to Attu, the last island on the Aleutian chain, 1,500 miles into the Pacific Ocean from Anchorage. Jack was stationed there as a 19-year-old Coast Guardsman in 1969 just before we married.

Attu serves as a Long-Range Aid to Navigation (LORAN) station, established by the Navy during World War II and maintained by the Coast Guard since the 1950s. Today, it is still widely used by fishermen in the northern Pacific as an extremely reliable navigation tool.

Except for the presence of 20 Coast Guardsmen, Attu is uninhabited. Its treeless, windswept tundra and mountains contain no wildlife except birds. The long winters are harsh, with over 20 feet of snow, 70-mph winds and a chill factor well below zero. Nonetheless, in his letters, Jack wrote of the mystic beauty of this place where salmon run so thick one can walk across the river.

Through the years, Jack talked of Attu often and dreamed of going back and taking me with him. However, no civilians are allowed on the island. While surfing the Internet, I discovered the only group that is permitted access. ATTOUR from Alaska takes bird watchers to Attu to see rare Asian birds on North American soil. I signed up. For Christmas 1998, I presented Jack with a gift certificate for a week on Attu.

This summer our dream finally came true. On June 11 we took the five-hour flight from Anchorage to Attu. We had been delayed one day by weather on the island. Attu is usually foggy, windy and rainy. The sun rarely shines.

From the air, the first places Jack pointed out were the Coast Guard Station, Massacre Bay and Alexai Point — places he talked about for 30 years and pointed out to me on a map two days before. I couldn't believe I was seeing them with my own eyes. Attu took Jack away from me for a full year. Now we were here together. I kept looking at Jack, grinning from ear to ear.

To our delight, the sun peeked out through the clouds. The next two days stayed bright and sunny. Everyone was shocked. This was extraordinary weather for Attu.

We basked in 18 hours of daylight each day. We took advantage of the long sunny days and biked and hiked all over the island, visiting places Jack talked of through the years.

Attu was the site of a bloody WW II battle. Over 2,500 Japanese and American soldiers were killed in 1942-43. Today, the island is a National Historical Monument. Remnants of the war are everywhere — rusted machinery, fallen communication towers, dilapidated Quonset huts, and special matting used to construct quick runways.

In recent years, the U.S. and Japan erected war memorials in separate valleys on the island. Massacre Bay was the site of the American invasion on Attu. A year later the military built a temporary base on Alexai Point. The Seabees constructed Navy Town, a complete military village including a jail.

During our stay, daily temperatures hovered in the high 40s to low 50s. We paused for midafternoon naps on the black sandy volcanic beaches. With the sun on our faces and gentle ocean breezes patting our cheeks, we quickly sported wind and sunburned faces. When the fog, wind and rain rolled in for the next three days, our Gore Tex clothing kept us dry while we hiked the marshy, wet tundra.

The accommodations on Attu were part of the adventure. An abandoned LORAN building was semi-refurbished 25 years ago by ATTOUR. The dorm-type rooms had rusted blue metal bunk beds. Rusted metal shelves held our clothing. Silver sheets of insulation and pieces of cardboard served as floor rugs. A propane-heated day room was furnished with thrift-store discards.

Three curtained stalls with wash basins and two decrepit shower stalls made up the bath facilities

Attu adventure is connection to past



for 40 people. Generators supplied electricity for lights and pumping water only during the day. Three outhouses with institution-size cans of Lysol were our restroom facilities. Earplugs at night kept out the snoring from adjacent dorms that pen-

Among the last to Attu

The world is shrinking, but still ...

A visit to remote, uninhabited Attu Island, Alaska, with its rough weather and near primitive accommodations would be enough to dampen anyone's spirits. That may be why so few people ever do travel to the westernmost tip of the U.S.

Attu isn't even on anyone's stopover list, or a place a traveler might pass through. But if one has a cause or reason to go to Attu, the trip can be an adventure.

Just ask Rosalie Nourse of Spokane, or Frank Brown of Seattle. The two BPA energy efficiency representatives in the past year plus traveled to Attu separately, and unknowingly to each other initially. Nourse writes about her trip with her husband, Jack, this year; and she writes about Brown's two trips.

As it happens, the two BPA people may be among the last civilians who will ever visit the farthest island in the Aleutians. Brown's recent trip was the last for ATTOUR, which has been flying to Attu for 24 years. The tour company can no longer get civilian aircraft landing permits and is closing down its business.

So any visitors to Attu in the future — beyond the Coast Guard and military — will have to get there by boat when the weather permits. Fifteen hundred miles from Anchorage — by sea! That will make Alaska's westernmost tip even more remote in a time when the world is otherwise shrinking in many ways.

But two BPA people will be able to say they've been there — to Attu, or at Attu.

etrated the paper-thin walls of our room.

Fortunately, the rats were eliminated from the building before our group arrived. Conditions aside, the quarters were comfortable and functional. The showers were hot; the rooms warm; the sleeping bags cozy. The staff prepared home-cooked meals that were nutritious and plentiful.

For being a remote uninhabited island, Attu was bustling with activity the week we were there. Upon our arrival, we spotted a large sailing yacht in Casco Cove. A broadcasting team from New Zealand was working on a two-hour documentary on the Aleutian Islands, in conjunction with Oregon Public Broadcasting. This was their week to film on Attu.

Four World War II veterans were invited to the island to provide personal stories for the documentary. With the 37 of us from ATTOUR, the New Zealand film crew, the vets and the Coast Guardsmen, the island population swelled to 80 — four times its usual size.

The Coast Guard Station provided me with the greatest thrills of our trip. We sat on the front steps with the Coast Guard sign overhead and took pictures. That was the same place where Jack had his picture taken 30 years before.

The current Coast Guardsmen treated us like royalty. They gave us an extensive tour of the station and invited us to stay overnight. To eat, sleep and hang out in the same building where Jack had all those years ago was really special for me.

The Coasties also asked us

to come back for Morale Night, with home-made pizza and a movie, and they came to the plane to see us off on departure day.

Our departure on Saturday was bittersweet. It was an awesome week. Now it was time to go home. We watched the Super Aleutian Electra come down through the clouds and land on the airstrip next to the Coast Guard Station. As the plane soared skyward later, we took a last glance through the window at Attu. We had 10 rolls of film, two hours of video, a journal full of notes, and, hopefully, enough memories to last a lifetime.

— by Rosalie Nourse, energy efficiency representative in Spokane.

Cohort's trip is for the birds

As I was planning the surprise trip for my husband, Jack, I was amazed to find out that my energy efficiency colleague, Frank Brown, had just gone to Attu. Frank went the year before us, so I asked him about his trip so I would know what to expect.

Frank is an avid birder and knew of ATTOUR (the bird watcher group) 20 years ago. He had longed to make the trip, and finally went in May 1999 for three weeks.

Frank said he didn't spend relaxing days touring the island and taking naps on sunny beaches — like Jack and I did on our trip this year. Every day Frank put on his raingear, waterproof boots and backpack and took off on his mountain bike. He packed his lunch, bird books, camera and binoculars for each full day of bird watching.

As a true bird lover, Frank wanted to see the rare Asian birds that occasionally flew to the island. He

told how he raced on his bicycle from one spot on the island to another in his quest to see different birds.

The weather wasn't as nice for Frank's 1999 trip as it was for ours this summer. He had more of the "usual" conditions — snow, wind, rain, fog and the cold. The sun never peeked out on him. But in spite of the wet and the cold, Frank said he was happy because of the rare and exotic birds he saw.

As if that adventure wasn't enough, Frank went back to Attu this year — a month after Jack and I returned from our trip. He spent most of September there, but this time he had better weather — similar to ours.

Frank Brown shared his first Attu experience so I could better prepare for our trip. That helped us have a fun adventure instead of a miserable time. Not only are we colleagues at work, but we now share the thrill of having taken unusual vacations to an ultimate remote place.